

PHOTOGRAPHY

FAQ

Q Some camera specifications list AE and WB bracketing. Are these features worth having?

A Bracketing is a technique used by professional photographers to ensure they get the best possible shot. Typically, a shot is taken at 'normal' exposure settings, followed by one slightly darker, and a third slightly brighter. It's then possible to pick the best shot after the event, or even combine the best bits of the different shots in software.

Anyone can try this feature using the exposure compensation function, but an automatic exposure (AE) bracketing function takes the three pictures in quick succession with no need to change settings. White balance (WB) bracketing does the same for the white balance control, and can be useful for ensuring correct colours in tricky lighting conditions.

Ben Pitt

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PANASONIC Lumix DMC-FX33

★★★★★

£170 inc VAT

From www.purelygadgets.co.uk

This exceptionally stylish ultra-compact camera is packed with enticing features. The lens is the highlight, with a 3.6x zoom range for wide-angle shooting plus highly effective optical image stabilisation. The back of the camera is less remarkable; there are a few buttons and a 2½in screen (the DMC-FX55 costs £200, and is essentially the same camera with a 3in screen). However, it's inside that the real interest lies.

Face detection is now standard in new cameras, but the DMC-FX33's implementation is one of the best. It accurately recognised multiple faces at skewed angle, even in profile, and produced superbly exposed portraits against bright and dark backgrounds. An Intelligent ISO function made smart decisions about the ISO speed based on both the available light and any detected movement. Best of all is Intelligent Auto, a sophisticated and fully automatic mode that controls these features. It also controls the scene preset, macro function and others to give the best possible photos in a range of situations. Having a fully automatic mode is nothing new, but Panasonic's much-hyped Intelligent Auto mode does seem to live up to its name.

The DMC-FX33's performance continues Panasonic's impressive track record, with fast autofocus and a speedy processor culminating in a shot every 1.5s in normal use, every 2s with the flash, and at 1.5 frames per second (fps) in continuous mode. Switching to Intelligent Auto mode reduced performance slightly, but not enough to put us off using it. Battery life was disappointing, though. It seems to be a trend



that ultra-compact cameras can no longer manage the 400-shot average to which we've become accustomed.

Our test shots were great, with excellent colours in evening sunlight and artificial light, and not a single bad exposure. Detail was usually impressive, too, particularly when using the flash. However, even in bright light there was evidence of noise. Dense foliage looked vague, which suggests that digital sharpening struggled to make sense of it, although the same sharpening worked well for simpler subjects. Indoors, problems with noise were greater. Despite image stabilisation, the DMC-FX33 struggled indoors without the flash, sacrificing detail for the sake of noise-reduction processing. Shots at ISO 200 were up to scratch, but at ISO 400 they were a little blotchy and more blurred, while at ISO 800 and 1600 they were

hopeless. It's disappointing, but hardly surprising given the 8-megapixel sensor's tiny ½in size.

Even so, the FX33 joins the frontrunners from our premium compact camera Labs (*Shopper 238*), with similar features, image quality and price to Canon's Ixus 950 IS. Of the two, the FX33 gets our vote. However, it doesn't outperform the winner, Pentax's cheaper Optio A30 (below), which gives superior image quality.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Elegant, compact design
- ✓ Sophisticated point-and-shoot mode
- ✗ Disappointing images in low light

DIGITAL CAMERA 8 megapixels (3,264x2,448), 3.6x optical zoom (28-100mm), SDHC card slot (27MB internal), li-ion battery
PART CODE DMC-FX33EB-S
DETAILS www.panasonic.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)

Battery life **278 shots**
-50% Reference +50% +100%

Also consider...

PENTAX Optio A30

★★★★★

£130 inc VAT

From www.purelygadgets.co.uk



The Optio A30 has a 10-megapixel sensor and an optically stabilised 3x zoom lens. It's possible to set the maximum ISO speed in the Auto ISO mode, and this helps to reduce noise. This camera is quick to focus and images have warm, vibrant colours. Portraits have natural skin tones and highlights are not clipped.



DIGITAL CAMERA 10 megapixels (3,648x2,736), 3x optical zoom (38-114mm), SDHC slot (22MB internal), 710mAh li-ion battery
PART CODE 19215
DETAILS www.pentax.co.uk
FULL REVIEW Dec 2007

Battery life **283 shots**
-50% Reference +50% +100%

CANON EOS 400D

★★★★★

£429 inc VAT

From www.johnlewis.com



The successor to the hugely popular EOS 350D, Canon's EOS 400D is the best affordable digital SLR camera on the market. It is really hard not to love this camera with its incredibly fast focusing, high capture rate and brilliant image quality from the 10.1-megapixel sensor. For photography enthusiasts who want to upgrade from a film SLR or compact camera, this is undoubtedly the model to get.



DIGITAL CAMERA 10.1 megapixels (3,888x2,592), 3x optical zoom (18-55mm), CompactFlash slot, li-ion battery
PART CODE 1237 B009AA
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk
FULL REVIEW Feb 2007

Battery life **506 shots**
-50% Reference +50% +100%

FUJIFILM FinePix S8000fd

★★★★★

£192 inc VAT

From www.rankhour.com

Fujifilm has produced a range of good SLR-styled ultra-zoom cameras over the past few years, and the FinePix S8000fd is its best yet. It's the first to include optical image stabilisation to counteract blur from camera shake. The competition has offered this feature for some time, and its arrival here is timely because of the huge 18x zoom range. Only two other cameras match this feat: the Olympus SP-560 UZ (reviewed on page 44) and Panasonic's DMC-FZ18 (see 'Also consider...', below). The S8000fd's lens is exactly the same as that used on Olympus's camera, but everything else about the camera is recognisably Fujifilm.

We were impressed by the effectiveness of the image stabilisation, which helped us achieve blur-free photos in 70 per cent of our test shots, which were taken with a 1/500s shutter speed and 100mm focal length. Unsurprisingly, it was considerably less effective at the full 486mm zoom position, where even the tiniest shakes are heavily magnified, so the full zoom is only really useful outdoors in bright light or with a tripod.

Now that Fujifilm cameras include an SDHC as well as a slower xD card slot, we have been looking forward to a boost in their performance, but this has yet to materialise. The leisurely 3s startup time is forgivable because of the lens size, but the 2.5s wait between subsequent shots is disappointing.

The main culprit is the autofocus, which takes at least a second to lock on to its subject and up to 3s in dim lighting. The continuous mode ambled along at 0.5fps at maximum quality, although 4- and 2-megapixel modes capture up to 15 shots at 2fps and 15fps respectively.

The controls are a little disappointing in that they resemble those of a compact camera more than an SLR. There are dedicated buttons for the pop-up flash, optical image stabilisation and face detection, but it feels like the latter two exist more to advertise these features' existence, as they're not likely to require regular switching on and off. A dedicated ISO button would have been far more useful. Even so, the camera is reasonably quick to use.

A responsive exposure value (EV) readout helps with choosing settings in manual mode, and pressing the exposure compensation button turns the four-way pad into aperture and shutter speed controls. Manual focus is available, too.

However, rather than use digital magnification to help fine-tune settings, a marker on the screen changes colour when the autofocus sensor detects sharp focus as you adjust. This is useful when you're setting up a shot on a tripod and want to set focus and leave it there, but less useful when shooting tricky subjects that confuse the autofocus sensor.



Image quality in our tests was far from poor, but compared to the magnificent photos taken with Panasonic's DMC-FZ18, details weren't quite as sharp. This was particularly noticeable in dark areas of photos, where images suffered from noise, even in reasonably well-lit conditions.

Towards the edges of photos we could see chromatic aberrations – this is where the red, green and blue components of the image don't line up perfectly. This resulted in a halo of discoloration around highly contrasted areas of colour. Still, none of these problems was visible when viewed on a monitor or printed out at normal sizes.

Indoors, Fujifilm's powerful noise-reduction processing virtually eliminated noise at ISO 400 without sacrificing much detail, while pictures at ISO 800 were clean, but lacking in detail.

Costing around £60 less than the excellent Lumix DMC-FZ18, the FinePix S8000fd is an extremely attractive proposition. You'll need to spend a further £20 on batteries and a charger, though. With this in mind, it's worth paying the premium for the DMC-FZ18's superior image quality, performance and controls. The FinePix S8000fd isn't far behind in any of these respects, though, and it's a camera we'd be happy to own.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Huge, stabilised zoom
- ✓ Competitive price
- ✗ Some image quality niggles

DIGITAL CAMERA 8 megapixels (3,264x2,448), 18x optical zoom (27–486mm), xD and SDHC card slots (58MB internal), 4x AA batteries
PART CODE NC00230A
DETAILS www.fujifilm.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)



PANASONIC Lumix DMC-FZ18

★★★★★

£253 inc VAT

From www.purelygadgets.co.uk

Panasonic's new DMC-FZ18 has a huge

18x optically stabilised zoom lens and is capable of stunning quality photos. It has a comprehensive range of controls and is fairly fast to start up and take shots.

The 8-megapixel sensor may not have the highest resolution, but overall, the DMC-FZ18 comes close to entry-level DSLR quality for considerably less outlay. It's the best



DIGITAL CAMERA 8 megapixels (3,264x2,448), 18x optical zoom (28–504mm), SDHC slot (27MB internal), li-ion battery
PART CODE DMC-FZ18EB-K
DETAILS www.panasonic.co.uk
FULL REVIEW Jan 2008



FUJIFILM FinePix F20

★★★★★

£98 inc VAT

From www.kikatek.com

Despite its cheap price, Fujifilm's FinePix F20 camera has a metal body and a lithium-ion battery. The F20's 2 1/2in screen is also above average for a budget camera.

The FinePix F20 offers superb image quality and produced pleasing colours and sharp detail. It is an excellent camera at an excellent price.



COMPACT DIGITAL CAMERA 6.1 megapixels (2,848x2,136), 3x optical zoom, 10MB internal memory, xD slot, 3.6V 1,150mAh li-ion battery
PART CODE N077830A
DETAILS www.fujifilm.co.uk
FULL REVIEW Sep 2007



CANON PowerShot A570 IS

★★★★★

£108 inc VAT

From www.rankhour.com

PRICE CUT!



The A570 IS has a 4x optically stabilised zoom lens, which makes it great for counteracting camera shake, especially in low light. It also has face detection and full photographic control including aperture- and shutter-priority modes. Image quality is as good as we'd expect given the specifications and price.



DIGITAL CAMERA 7.1 megapixels (3,072x2,304), 4x optical zoom (35–140mm), SDHC slot (16MB card supplied), 2x AA batteries
PART CODE 1773B008AA
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk
FULL REVIEW Nov 2007



NIKON Coolpix P5100

★★★★★

£212 inc VAT

From www.purelygadgets.co.uk

The P5100 is an update to the Coolpix P5000, which we reviewed in *Labs, Shopper* 238. The design is largely identical, but the sensor has been upgraded from 10 to 12 megapixels and an extra 10g brings the weight to 250g.

With no other specification changes, the two cameras largely share the same strengths and weaknesses. There's a hotshoe and threaded lens ring for attaching accessories, and the magnesium alloy body looks smart and feels robust. We love the layout of controls, with a command dial providing direct access to exposure settings. Highly effective optical image stabilisation is built in to counteract blur at slow shutter speeds.

Sadly, the list of problems is just as long. There's no RAW mode or manual focus, and manual exposure is made difficult by a coarse shutter speed control, which jumps in whole stops rather than thirds of a stop. The 3.5x zoom range is stingy, but the P5100's biggest weakness is its performance. It takes up



to 2s to focus and around 3s between shots. Continuous shooting is even slower than on the P5000, at 0.33fps at the top-quality setting.

The Coolpix P5100's saving grace is the best image quality we have seen from a compact camera. Colour reproduction reminds us of Nikon's digital SLRs, with a subtle warmth to pictures that flatters skin tones. Detail isn't far behind SLRs, with smooth, accurate fine details that other 12-megapixel compacts gloss over. Low-light performance can't match that of digital SLRs, but the noise levels are the best we've seen from a 12-megapixel compact, giving usable results at ISO 800.

None of the P5100's problems is fatal. Apart from performance, it's a pleasure to use. If you don't mind making sacrifices for stunning image quality, it's ideal.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Stunning image quality
- ✓ Comprehensive hands-on controls
- ✗ Basic performance

DIGITAL CAMERA 12 megapixels (4,000x3,000), 3.5x optical zoom (35-123mm), SDHC card slot (25MB internal), Li-ion battery
PART CODE VAA840B1
DETAILS www.nikon.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)



OLYMPUS SP-560 UZ

★★★★★

£231 inc VAT

From www.purelygadgets.co.uk

The SP-560 UZ is an update to the SP-550 UZ, reviewed in *What's New, Shopper* 232. Inside the largely identical shell, the sensor has one extra megapixel and is physically slightly larger, resulting in shorter focal lengths when converted into 35mm film equivalents. Still, the 486mm telephoto setting is extraordinary and the 18x zoom range is as big as we've seen on a digital camera.

Olympus has largely dispelled its predecessor's performance problems. Focusing remains slow at the long end of the zoom, but the camera is now able to save pictures as fast as it takes them. Just over 2s between shots isn't dazzling, but it's fast enough. The full-resolution continuous mode ran at 1.2fps for 19 shots, but dropping the resolution resulted in faster bursts, rising to 15fps for 40 shots at 1.2 megapixels. Battery life is fantastic when using high-capacity NiMH batteries, although you'll need to buy these separately.

Image quality tests revealed a significant improvement over the SP-550. Detail was much better than the small jump from 7



to 8 megapixels would suggest, the automatic white balance coped well with artificial lighting and there were barely any signs of chromatic aberrations and purple fringing, two problems we spotted on the SP-550's photos. The Shadow Adjustment Technology feature seen on other recent Olympus cameras brightened up dark areas of high-contrast shots to reveal more detail. Face detection wasn't great at locking on to faces, but coped well with tricky lighting.

The SP-560 UZ's specifications place it in direct competition with Fujifilm's FinePix S8000fd and Panasonic's DMC-FZ18 (reviewed on page 43). All three are great cameras, but we'd be inclined to spend the extra on the superior DMC-FZ18.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Capable all-rounder
- ✓ Massive, stabilised zoom
- ✗ Outclassed by Panasonic's DMC-FZ18

DIGITAL CAMERA 8 megapixels (3,264x2,448), 18x optical zoom (27-486mm), xD card slot (47MB internal), 4x AAs
PART CODE N2942592
DETAILS www.olympus.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)



CHOOSING A... Digital SLR Camera

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

RESOLUTION: 6 megapixels
SUPPLIED LENS: 18-55mm, f/3.5-f/5.6
MONITORING: 2½in, 215,000-pixel LCD screen
CONTINUOUS SHOOTING: 2½fps
SUPPLIED MEMORY: None
Recommended minimum in grey

1 A digital SLR camera with the specifications shown above will cost around £400 and suit photography enthusiasts on a budget. Despite being an entry-level digital SLR, image quality will be in a different league to all but the best fixed-lens cameras, particularly when it comes to smooth, sharp detail with minimal image noise.

2 Spend more and you'll get a camera with a higher resolution. Ten megapixels is common even for some entry-level models. This gives finer detail, although the difference isn't as great as the figures might suggest.

3 The kit lenses supplied with budget digital SLRs can take excellent pictures, but their zoom ranges and macro-focus capabilities are limited. If you're interested in telephoto photography, consider buying a second lens, perhaps with a 70-200mm focal length. Alternatively, buy a body-only camera and an 18-200mm or similar lens. Aperture values tell you how much light the lens can capture at either end of its zoom range; the lower the f-number, the brighter the lens.

4 A 2½in, 215,000-pixel screen is standard among digital SLRs, but you'll be using the optical viewfinder to compose shots. Its through-the-lens (TTL) view shows exactly what is captured by the camera's sensor and makes manual focusing easy. A second, passive LCD screen is useful for displaying camera settings.

5 Most affordable SLRs outperform even the fastest compact cameras. However, look out for a fast continuous mode, autofocus and shutter lag if quick-fire photography is a priority.

6 Digital SLRs usually don't come with any storage, so budget around £30 for a fast (at least 60x) 1GB CompactFlash or SD card to ensure that it doesn't create a performance bottleneck.